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# Overcoming Obstacles to Employment Of the Visually Handicapped

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PERHAPS THE GREATEST problem encountered in seeking jobs for blind people is business' and industry's lack of understanding about the blind and their ability. All counselors know that there are jobs in almost all industries that blind people can do just as well as sighted people. We can prove this if given a chance, but it is difficult to explain ahead of time. For instance, it is most difficult to explain to people that a legally blind person may not be totally blind, that there are six categories of blindness, ranging from total blindness to light perception and then on down to 20/200. It may take many trips to a personnel director's office to explain this in a way that he understands and to arouse his interest in hiring blind people.

It seems to me that just the word "blindness" causes some people to turn their backs on us immediately. We have asked for the privilege of walking through factories and other places of employment to look for jobs the blind could do. We have not been allowed this opportunity in many instances. Some companies turn us away, saying that their insurance company will not allow them to hire people who are blind. I have often wondered if this is really true, but this is one of the excuses we find. Other companies, branches of large corporations, say it is company policy not to hire the blind. As you can see, these excuses are hard to get around and there is not much a counselor can say.

Even when an employer accepts a blind employee, the employee may not have much chance to make good. For example, I will tell of an experience with an industrial establishment in Knoxville. One morning the personnel director of this company called me. His first words were, "Someone has pulled a booboo out here and I need your help." When I asked what his difficulty was, he stated that someone had hired a *blind* person to work and he wanted me to come out and talk with them. I asked him what was so bad about that? He was simply frightened to death. I got this story from him: That morning, the blind employee got up from his work table and headed for the restroom. On his way, he ran into a machine that happened to be idle. When he reached the restroom, instead of pushing on the door, he pushed against the wall. Several people noticed this and went to the foreman with the information. Our industrial specialist from the state office happened to be in my office at this time, and we both went to talk with this boy's foreman about the situation. They had already dismissed him from his job, so we took him with us to see if we could do something about getting him rehired. In talking with the foreman, we found that the boy, whose vision is 20/200 in both eyes, had been working for about a week and had been making production. Yet, when he got up to go to the restroom and pushed on the wall instead of the door, they became







John Gordon, shown here with Mrs. Gordon, is making a success of his record shop in spite of being burglarized twice.

alarmed and said he could not do their work. We asked if we might go around in other parts of the factory and look for jobs he could do, but they would not talk about that. They just said that a blind person could not work in their factory.

I recall a courthouse in one of the counties where I worked. I saw the opportunity for a vending stand in that building, but worked 10 years before finally receiving permission to place a blind person there. There are other locations for which I have been trying for years to get permission to establish a stand.

It is always disappointing when I have a well-motivated, well-trained client who, I know, could perform a job or jobs in a plant or factory, and then fail because I cannot find an employer who is interested in hiring the blind or who is willing to initiate a training plan with us, even if we pay for it.

Of course, we counselors know that we need to be selective in placement work, that is, we must pick the right person for the

right work. This, too, is a problem sometimes. We often do not have enough time to learn the client, except through psychological testing, eye examinations, and general physical examinations. He may have personal problems that are just too much for him, but he comes to us desperate for work and expects us to get out and find him a job as soon as possible. We are not always selective.

I can recall placing a blind person with an ice company which was owned and operated by a man and his wife. They were very kind to me and anxious to do something for a blind person. I took this person for an interview and they hired him, but he never did show up for work. He had acted interested during the interview, but offered many excuses when I went to see him to inquire why he didn't go to work. This man and his wife were kind enough to hire another blind person who had some vision. He worked a week or two and called me to say that the work was too hard for him and he was going





to quit. Knowing what a problem this would cause, and how it would hurt our agency in placing the blind in the future, I talked real straight to the client and urged him to continue working. However, he just walked off the job and never returned. Later on, the people who had hired him called me and said they just didn't think a blind person could do their work. A well-motivated, adjusted, ambitious blind person could have done it, but this opportunity was now closed.

To mention just a little more about selective placement, I have a place here in Knoxville that had three blind people working at the same time. All three wanted to work and had the ability and desire to do so. One day, as I was walking down the street, their foreman walked up to me and asked if I had any more good people such as the last one I had placed with him. As it happened, I did have another good prospect and I placed him in the same company. This is what I am trying to say: if we make good placements and the people are interested and do good work, then it is not difficult to go back and get another job for a blind client.

We have also learned that sometimes we fail to offer enough training to prepare people for work. I have heard rehabilitation people remark many times that our clients need to be far better trained than the sighted people who are seeking the same jobs.

At best, a counselor meets with many disappointments in trying to train clients and make good placements. We sometimes have clients who seem motivated, ambitious, and interested in working, but when we place them on a job we find that we were one hundred per cent wrong. I have two or three in mind with whom I have worked for 8 to 10 years, training and placing them several times, but they failed to continue to work for some reason or other.

One boy was finishing up eight months of training and was ready to be placed, when he was involved in a break-in and sent to prison. I placed him again after his confinement, but he has now quit this job.

I worked with another client for years. He finally accepted training and I placed him on a job, but he soon quit. His background, temperament, and family situation were not conducive to steady employment, and these

were conditions over which I had no control. A few weeks ago he died a tragic, violent death.

With much encouragement, another client accepted training and placement. The work was well within his mental capacity, and he did it well, but he was unable to find his way to and from his work station. I was called from home one night at 11:00 p.m. to go and hunt for him. At other times he became lost during the day, and finally his boss had to let him go.

Home and family situations are sometimes a detriment to the training and placement of the blind. I know of several people who could probably be trained and placed but their parents will not allow it. We have great difficulty in getting some parents to let their children go to the School for the Blind in Donelson, where they could acquire a high school education and be better prepared for some vocation.

Automation has hurt us more than anything else we can think of in getting the blind employed. Several years ago, visually limited people could become elevator operators or perform many repetitive-type jobs in industry. These jobs have been eliminated through automation. We must now look to other types of work.

As I see it, this is the big problem for the counselor. We must talk to people in industry, we must talk to groups of interested citizens, we must let people know about the work we are trying to do. The better known a counselor is and the more people he knows, the better his chance of placing the blind. We need to stop at factories in our territory, talk with the personnel people, maintain a good relationship with them, and keep before them the fact that we are constantly searching for jobs for the blind people in our territory. In addition, we must spend more time with our clients, learning to know them better and encouraging them to tell us what they want to do.

Every counselor faces problems in placing the blind in employment. But we will have fewer problems if we can educate the public to the fact that a well-adjusted, well-trained, and appropriately placed blind person can do the job as well as anyone else.





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